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ABSTRACT

It is difficult for a student to understand small group communication and the role communication plays in making an experience a positive or negative one until he or she is actually involved in small group experience. Such goes the argument for experiential learning in the classroom. By incorporating a service-learning component into the classroom, the simulation phase is replaced by the actual experience of the real world. In one experiential learning project, five community non-profit agencies were invited to the classroom to talk about their agencies and discuss a "problem" they could use assistance in solving. Most of the problems had to do with image, communication, or publicity. After listening to the presentations of the different agencies, students selected one to work for and small groups were formed. A brief description of each of the five projects indicates a wide range of success. To determine if students were learning anything from the experience, two written projects, a journal and a final reflection paper, were assigned. In the journal writing assignment, students were asked to carefully note specific details about individual and group development. In the final paper assignments, students were asked to detail specific lessons learned about small group communication. While not all reflection goals were met, most were. Written works indicated that most students learned from the group experience. (TB)

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SERVICE-LEARNING IN THE COMMUNICATION CURRICULUM:

TAKING A LEADING ROLE IN EDUCATION

Panel Presentation
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Service Learning in the Small Group Communication Class

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Learning by experiencing has for many of us teaching small group communication been an important and necessary method of teaching. It is difficult for a student to understand small group communication and the role communication plays in making the experience a positive or negative one until he or she is actually involved in a small group experience. And such goes the argument for experiential learning in the classroom.

By incorporating a service-learning component into the classroom, we take the simulation phase out of the learning model and make the actual experience a "real-world" one. Let me explain in general terms why service-learning is an appropriate method for teaching students about communicating in small groups. That discussion will be followed by a brief synopsis of a service learning project designed for the small group communication classroom.

According to the basic experiential model of learning, the first phase of learning is the "do" or experience stage. Typically, structured activities have been incorporated into the classroom that simulate some small group situation. After students experience the simulation

they are asked to "share" their feelings about participating in the activity, followed by a stage where they discuss and "interpret" the meaning of the lesson(s) to be learned. Students then offer "generalizations" about the activity based upon their own past experiences and speculate as to how they could "apply" these learnings to their own real-world situations.

Adding a service-learning component to the equation brings the "real-world" to the forefront of the model. By participating in a service-learning project designed to have students work in groups providing some service to a community agency, their experience is more than a simulated one designed to invoke some learning. By keeping journals, students can share their feelings about their experience and begin to reflect upon what they are learning. The journals provide opportunity to generalize from other group experiences and to begin to formulate their own theories and speculate about how these lessons can be useful to them. Let me provide a specific project that helps further explain how the experiential model of learning can be expanded and refined to provide enhanced student learning.

PROJECT: Small Groups Solving Problems

Early in the semester, five community non-profit agencies were invited to the classroom to talk about their agencies and discuss a "problem" they could use assistance in solving. After listening to the different agencies, students selected different agencies to work for and groups of five to six members were formed. For the purposes of this project, the agencies included an arboretum, the American Red Cross, a food distribution organization, the local literacy council, and a family/child services agency.

Once formed, the groups first task was to contact the agency representative and determine "a problem" to be analyzed. The agencies had been asked to identify problems that could be analyzed without frequent student visits to the agency site to alleviate potential transportation problems. Most of the problems identified dealt with image problems, communication problems, or general public awareness issues.

With problem in hand, the groups begin to analyze the problem and propose possible solutions and plans for implementation. Their goal was to propose solutions that would actually be implemented and thereby provide service to the agencies. Throughout this process, students kept journals -- making observations about the group experience and speculating about and reflecting upon what they were learning about working in small groups. They incorporated specific course concepts into these journals in preparation for their final papers, "What I learned about working in small groups..."

At the end of the semester, agency representatives were invited back during the class period when their student group would be detailing the problem, their analysis, proposed solution(s) and implementation. Feedback from students indicated an overwhelming positive response to the learning experience. And feedback from agencies was likewise positive in terms of the services provided.

A CASE STUDY: Service-learning in one Small Group Communication Class

During the Winter 1997 semester, I incorporated a service-learning activity into the Small Group Communication class I was teaching.

During the third week of the semester, I made arrangements for representatives from each of the five agencies to meet with students during class time and briefly talk about their agency and the "problem" they would like the group to analyze and solve. Prior to this, time had been taken to discuss the assignment (see attached "Academic Service-Learning Group Problem Solving Project"). After the agencies spoke, students were asked to rank each of the agencies according to their desire to work with that agency. I announced that weight would be given to those that provided the most explicit reasons for wanting to work with that agency. Groups of five or six were formed based upon student requests, and then each group's first responsibility was to make contact with the agency and discuss the specifics of "the problem" with the agency representative.

The following is a synopsis of what transpired for each group throughout the semester.

Group 1: Nichols Arboretum

This group was asked to work on two different projects: (1) Help with the plans for communicating information to the public about the new main entrance at the Arboretum (a change that had many area residents concerned because of the change in traffic and parking patterns); and (2) Contact Ameritech about plans to provide free cellular phones and service to visitors at the Arboretum. The group was initially frustrated when they were unable to contact the agency representative, but soon began to talk about the learning experience as a "real" one because this was just one more logistical problem encountered by small groups working together. The group was successful in negotiating a contract with Ameritech that would be implemented over the summer. They were less successful with communicating

information about the new main entrance, but not because of their own lack of effort. The move of the entrance was held up in city council meetings and by the end of the semester, the issue had not been resolved.

Group 2: Food Gatherers

This group was asked to help prepare a data base for the purpose of keeping track of all distribution sites. They worked with the agency representative to prepare a phone interview questionnaire and then proceeded to contact each of the distribution sites and gather information, such as times for food pickup and eligibility requirements. Each member of the group took a portion of the phone calls, and once information was gathered they helped input the information into an actual data base. With this particular group, one member did not make the phone calls on his list, creating frustration among the other group members. As other group members mentioned in their journals and in their final papers, it got to the point that the group was less cohesive when this person did participate since they had become a functioning unit without him -- an important lesson learned about the workings of a small group.

Group 3: Washtenaw Literacy Council

This group was asked to help raise funds for the agency. In addition to contacting local companies and requesting donations, they also prepared an informational brochure that the agency can distribute when requesting funds. Although initially disappointed that they would not be asked to work as tutors (a task the agency was not able to fulfill because of the

amount of time required to train tutors), this group was very pleased with their work planning a Bowl-a-thon that raised money for the agency. One member of the group was identified early on by the other group members as a slacker and there was initially some concern. After contacting the group member, however, they found out he was in the process of dropping the class entirely.

Group 4: American Red Cross, Washtenaw County Chapter

This group was asked to lay the groundwork for forming a campus chapter of the American Red Cross. They collected all the information the agency would need to officially become incorporated as a student organization, and also surveyed the student body about their interest in such an organization. The biggest frustration for this group was that they felt they weren't doing enough for the agency. Every group member was eager to actually implement the plans to start a student chapter, but the agency wanted to wait.

Group 5: Child and Family Services/Life Work

Probably the most frustrated of the groups was the group working with this agency. It was well past mid-semester before they were actually clear about what they were suppose to be doing and by then time had run out to actually carry through with any plans. The agency representative was vague about what the group was to be doing, and repeated phone calls and requests went unheeded. They did end up gathering information about retention problems on campus and possible ways in which a family services agency could assist with student retention. According to group member journals and final papers, they may have become the

most cohesive of all the groups because of the cohesiveness that resulted from their shared frustrations.

In addition to the services provided to agencies, it was also important for me to determine whether or not students actually learned anything about small group communication as a result of the experience. Two specific assignments were aimed at determining this: (1) student journals and (2) a final reflection paper. Let me discuss briefly my own reactions to the extent of learning that I believe took place and my own critique of the two reflective assignments.

For the purposes of this class, reflection was on the quality of group interaction as students identified service goals and planned to implement them for a social service organization. Students reflected on group meetings in their journals, and wrote final progress reports in which they reflected upon the lessons learned.

For the ***journal assignment***, students were asked to "carefully note SPECIFIC DETAILS about individual and group development according to concepts discussed throughout the semester. They were presented with a sampling of questions based upon material from the text and were told to "provide specific examples of actual communication that illustrate" the points they were making. It was stated that the "overall objective of the journal [was] to provide an opportunity to express (in writing) the lessons [you] learned as a result of being a member of this group." See the attached assignment, "Reflective Journals," for a complete description of this assignment. The journal assignments were evaluated on a pass/fail basis, but I did provide feedback, rating the journals either "poor," "fair," "good," "very good," or "excellent."

The weakest examples treated the journals as diaries, reporting on what happened week by week. Little, if any attempt, was made to talk about the group's progress in light of what we were learning about group development. The emphasis was on logistics, rather than reflection on learning. For example, Jeff writes:

> We all planned to meet at the library at 7:00. I admit I was a little late, but Dan never even showed.

Jeff goes on to tell me more about what went on at the meeting, but never mentions what he may have learned about group climate as a result of (1) his being late and, more importantly, (2) Dan never showing up -- which as I was observing was becoming a real trouble spot for this group.

Most journals fell within the "fair" to "very good" range -- depending upon the extent of reflection on learning. None earned an "excellent" rating. Most were still highly anecdotal, yet did begin to interpret group experience in terms of course concepts. For example, Jane writes:

> Some of the non-verbal cues are evident when Dan moves into the group or talks. His chair is pulled slightly away from us and when he talks, nobody really looks at him. His ideas don't really pertain to the group's goals. As soon as we seem to wrap things up, he just left and didn't ask if we wanted him to do anything else.

This is the same "Dan" mentioned by Jeff in the previous example. While, again, there was no attempt made at solving this problem, there was analysis of group communication by applying course principles.

The ***final progress report*** was an assignment where students were asked to reflect upon what they learned as a result of the small group experience. In order to demonstrate individual learning, students were asked to "prepare a final report detailing the specific (and

significant) lessons learned about small group communication." Students were to focus on four or five specific lessons they have learned as a consequence of participating in the academic service-learning project. Once again they were asked to provide specific examples of communicative behavior that illustrate the lessons learned. A complete description of this reflection assignment can be found in the attached syllabus.

With this assignment students did a better job reflecting more specifically upon "lessons" that had been learned about small group communication. Problems arose because most had not fully detailed examples of communication in their journals, and now, at this end point in the semester, were unable to remember examples. For example, Susan writes:

> I learned how to "depersonalize" statements when I was giving criticism. I had to call James and ask him why he wasn't coming to meetings. When I called him to find out what was going on, I tried to ask what the situation was, not what was he doing not showing up. A negative environment can only make the problems worse.

She does a good job here reflecting upon something she learned, but doesn't provide "what was said" to illustrate that point.

The most "reflective" part of this particular assignment were student reflections upon the service component of the learning experience. Most students were much better able to reflect upon what this experience -- providing a service to a non-profit agency -- meant to them. For example, Becky writes:

> This type of learning provides motivation to a small group class. The part that kept us going towards our goal (besides the grade!) was the real life non-profit organization that was relying on our help. Beverly seemed so grateful that we were doing this small project for her. To her and the people at [the agency] it was a lifesaver. ... I really believed in our project, and I think my group members did too.

While not all of my reflection goals were met with these two assignments, I do believe students learned from the group experience. Reflecting upon learning appeared to be a struggle for most students who have traditionally not been asked to really think about what they are learning and why they are learning it, but rather are often asked to simply repeat "facts." In general, I do believe that in addition to providing services to local agencies, there was also learning taking place above and beyond what transpires in the traditional classroom. Learning and service -- the experiential model of the future.

performance.